

SUPPORTWORKS

— THE SELF-HELP CLEARINGHOUSE

COPING WITH THE IRAQ WAR

IDEAS FOR STARTING AND RUNNING A FAMILY SUPPORT GROUP

WHAT IS A SELF-HELP GROUP?

A self-help group is made up of people getting together to help each other deal with a shared concern. Run by and for the members, a group can be started by anyone with a bit of courage, a sense of commitment, and a good dose of caring.

WHAT CAN I DO IN A SELF-HELP GROUP?

- * Give and receive emotional support (You aren't alone)
- * Share information and resources (So that's where you find it!)
- * Trade new ways of solving problems (It's not as hard as it looks)
- * Advocate as a group to attain common goals (Groups do things that individuals can't do alone)
- * Allow yourself to have a good time (Reduce stress and anxiety)

WHAT DO I DO TO START A GROUP?

1) Don't Re-Invent The Wheel

Consider visiting another similar support group. Group members often share ideas, formats, and energy. Call the people at your local self-help clearinghouse. They will help you find other support groups and may be able to provide you with consultation to help you get your group started.

2) Consider Hooking Up With A Supportive Organization

Some support groups have hooked up with an existing organization such as the American Red Cross, church, synagogue, library, or military family support unit.

These organizations are often willing to share resources with your group at little or no cost. These include a meeting place, copying equipment, refreshments, and other facilities that can make your start-up much easier. They may even have experience in starting this type of group.

However, joining forces can have disadvantages. Be sure that you know what the organization expects (if anything) from your support group.

Keep in mind that it is sometimes difficult to get unhooked. If you are unsure, do it on your own. You can always hook up with an organization at a later date.

3) Think Shared Leadership From The Start

Have a planning meeting with a few others who share your interest in starting (not simply joining) the group. Starting with a core group can help:

- * Prevent burn out
- * Distribute the work of starting the group
- * Model for others what self-help is all about -- it's a group (rather than individual) effort.

Try to make your core group representative of your expected membership. For suggestions on how to find co-leaders, see page 3 ("How do we get the word out?").

4) Remain Politically Neutral

War is controversial; everyone in your group will have feelings for and against this war. Remaining officially neutral will allow members to talk more openly. It is important that members feel free to discuss their thoughts and feelings without fear of criticism.

WHAT DO WE DO AT A PLANNING MEETING?

Your goal is to launch the group. The first 10 tasks are usually completed before the first public meeting. The last 3 can be done at any time.

1) Define the membership

Do you want to have families of military, veterans, anyone affected by the war, or another target group?

Here's a hint: It may seem comforting at first to form a group of similar people (such as wives of men of similar rank in the same branch of service). Indeed, people with very similar backgrounds quickly form bonds of trust and are less likely to find themselves in conflict.

On the other hand, a mixed group gives people a wider variety of perspectives. These differing points of view can help people learn new ways to solve problems.

2) Establish general goals for the group

For example, is this intended to be a small group of neighbors sharing feelings? Is it to be a larger group with multiple purposes?

3) List some possible activities

Choose some programs and activities which you feel would appeal to new members. Consider bringing these up as suggestions at the first "public" group meeting. Plan ahead. For example, some groups make plans to help returning military feel welcome and to assist families adjust more easily. Some ideas for programs and activities are listed on page 4.

4) Set a place and time for the first public meeting

Choose a neutral, private location where people will feel comfortable sharing feelings. Consider a church, school, local Y, or community center (which may be available for free). Avoid places which charge money (such as a restaurant).

5) Set a tentative meeting schedule

Consider meeting as often as people feel the need. Some groups meet twice a month alternating social and program meetings. Set an opening and closing time (and stick to it). Keep the formal meeting brief; allow for people to "hang out" afterwards.

6) Choose a meeting format

A suggested format for your public meetings is on page 3. It is important to keep the meeting structured. People feel more comfortable when they know what to expect.

7) Consider whether or not to have child care

Smaller groups can often recruit a teenager in a family to help. Check with a local youth group or college child development class for volunteers. Be sure your volunteer is qualified (and the location is safe for young children).

8) Pick a name for the group

Be sure to reflect the purpose of your group (such as Desert Storm Family Ties). Allow for changes in the composition of the group (such as when military personnel come home).

9) Swap names and phone numbers

Your core group is a self-help group itself!

10) Distribute the work

Everyone has a talent; distribute tasks (now and later) to help people feel more involved in the success of the group. Here are some jobs to do before the first public meeting:

- * Finding a meeting place
- * Publicizing the meeting(s)
- * Arranging refreshments
- * Buying name tags (and a felt tip pen)
- * Bringing a pad of paper and pencil for a name and phone list
- * Leading the first meeting

Here are some planning activities which can be done now or later:

11) Plan programs

Identify local professionals who would be willing to provide programs, facilitate discussions, or consult at your discretion. These people are welcome guests at your meetings. Remember: a self-help group is best run by its members. Support groups run by professionals on a long-term basis are a different type of group.

12) Think about coalitions

Consider hooking up other similar support groups to share resources and ideas (sound familiar?). Think about hooking up with a local supportive organization (see page 1).

13) Consider money

Family groups can run on pennies. A sponsoring organization may provide space and other resources at no charge. Share the privilege of bringing refreshments or giving each other gifts on birthdays or holidays. Having substantial funds may be more of a burden than a resource.

HOW DO WE GET THE WORD OUT?

For small groups, word of mouth is effective. Military leaders and clergy can help you. Be sure to tell your friends to tell their friends.

For large groups, put announcements where the people you want to reach will see or hear them. Think about using community calendars in newspapers and on radio and TV. Post flyers in post offices, churches, supermarkets, community centers, and libraries.

You may wish to consult someone with publicity experience (such as at your local self-help clearinghouse, newspaper, or radio or TV station).

HOW DO WE ORGANIZE A PUBLIC MEETING?

People coming to this meeting are likely to be apprehensive. A more highly structured format may help them feel more comfortable. Here is one suggestion:

1) Preparation

It is often helpful for the leaders of the meeting to get together for a short time to get settled in before the general membership arrives.

2) Greeting

Have a person at the front door to:

- * Say hello to each person
- * Give out name tags
- * Ask everyone to sign in (name and phone)

3) Formal opening

At the announced time the leader calls the meeting to order. The opening sets the tone for the entire meeting. Some groups open with a greeting, a prayer (such as the serenity prayer), and a listing of the group's purposes and the meeting's activities. Give permission for people to leave early if needed. Remember to emphasize confidentiality: What You Hear Here Stays Here.

4) Introductions

Go around the room allowing each member to introduce himself/herself. People may also wish to share the name of (and relationship to) a relative or friend in the military, what brought them to this group, or what they hope to gain from the group.

This is a good time for the leader to emphasize that everyone's anxiety and grief is valid. Set up your group so that it includes everyone on an equal basis. Some family group members may mistakenly "rank" their grief based on one of the following:

- * Location of service (how far from the front, in or out of the States)
- * Military status (reserve or active duty, deployed or non-deployed)
- * Relationship to group member (spouse, sister, brother)
- * Health status (healthy, injured, POW/MIA, or deceased)
- * Military rank (officer, enlisted)

5) Body of meeting

At the first meeting the main topic will be the organization of the group. This is the time for the leader to report on the initial suggestions of the planning committee and open the floor for comments and additional ideas. Be sure to let the members know that this is their group.

At subsequent meetings this time slot can be used for discussion, education, sharing, and programs (such as those listed on page 4). Some groups alternate program meetings with social or informal discussion meetings. Larger groups sometimes break into smaller groups to work on projects, programs, or sharing. Make time available at every meeting for personal sharing, but be sure to avoid the "Pity-Party" trap.

6) Planning

This is when you plan future meetings (choosing or announcing discussion topics, guest speakers, and special activities). This section can be very boring; make it brief by being organized. Remind everyone of the time and place of the next meeting.

7) Formal closing

At the announced time, the leader gathers the entire group to give a predictable, consistent signal to indicate that the meeting is over. This is when you say good-bye and let everyone know how important they are. Keep it short. Here are some guidelines:

- * Do whatever feels comfortable (for example, a big group hug, a prayer, the pledge of allegiance, or a song).
- * Leave on an upbeat note.
- * Be careful (especially if a prayer is used) to match the wording of the closing to the membership of the group.

8) Post-meeting review

This is a chance for the core group or officers to review what went well and what might need to be changed. Keep a log book of the activities of each meeting. Ups and downs in attendance are normal; don't judge success by the number of people present. Be good to yourself.

WHAT ARE SOME IDEAS FOR PROGRAMS?

Check out potential programs carefully. Be wary of "generous" people whose program is really designed to sell you something. In general, programs should appeal to the entire membership. However, if a program is aimed at part of the membership (such as women), plan a program (for men) for the same time. Here are some ideas:

- * Coping with the adjustments and grief that accompany separation
- * Reuniting families successfully (or "Now That He/She Is Home, Why Isn't Everything Perfect?")
- * How to communicate with deployed individuals (such as what to put in letters, how to have enjoyable telephone conversations, and how to use ham or fax communication)
- * How to obtain important information from the military
- * How to set up a family budget and use a checkbook
- * Dealing with holidays, birthdays, and other special occasions
- * Helping members of the group whose relatives become POW's or MIA's, are injured, or who die
- * How group members can support each other during an illness or other crisis
- * Finding and utilizing community resources
- * Identifying and coping with family problems
- * How to keep the communication lines open with your children

- * How to be honest with your kids when you are scared
- * How to minimize anxiety and destructive responses to stress
- * Dealing with the IRS and taxes
- * Sensitizing your employer to problems facing your family as a result of the war
- * Learning about different cultures.

WHAT ELSE CAN WE DO AT MEETINGS?

- * Set up a phone network. Swap phone numbers with people that you may wish to call. Assign one person to keep the name and address list for important announcements. Do not release the membership list to anyone.
- * Have a good time (have a cake for everyone who has a birthday or special date that month, play baseball, go to a zoo). Don't be shy--ask for a discount on admission.
- * Build new friendships.
- * Support deployed military (write group letters, take group pictures, record audio and videotapes).
- * Plan activities with other groups.

WHAT CAN WE DO BETWEEN MEETINGS?

- * Above all, be there for each other.

- * Use the phone network. Call each other between meetings when you feel like it. You may wish to work on projects, talk about good news (such as Big Red having puppies), share concerns, or just chat.
- * Serve as a source of information. The group might work closely with a local telephone information and referral source (often called First Call for Help) to keep track of current phone numbers to learn about health status of deployed individuals, how to get mail through, where to find credit counseling, or where to get help with bills.
- * Be an advocate. Encourage schools to set up counseling for children. Find and list businesses that give discounts to families of deployed. Work with the military to iron out communication bugs.
- * Produce a newsletter. Print a list of programs, local businesses that give discounts to military families, and inspirational ideas.
- * Make concrete preparations for the return of the military personnel. Plan a warm welcome program that can include every returning person regardless of when he or she comes back.

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